REPORT

Remembering Jo – The Legacy of Jo Grimond

Fringe meeting report, September 2002, with Michael McManus, William Wallace, Tony Greaves and Tom Dale

Report by **Graham Lippiatt**

There is a mythology of Jo Grimond among contemporary Liberals.[1] Good-looking, charismatic, aristocratic from an impeccably Liberal lineage, the man who transformed the Liberal Party from a marginalised, right-leaning grouplet into a radicalising force, inspiring a new generation of Liberals, showering ideas and new thinking on a moribund political scene – while at the same time providing the party with a real hope of electoral revival.

Despite the importance of Grimond to Liberals, no major biography of him was published until 2001; perhaps because he left no inviting diary, or substantial collection of papers to tempt a scholar, perhaps because, ultimately, Grimond failed. The revival faltered, there was no realignment of the non-socialist left under his leadership of the Liberal Party. As Lord Rodgers recalled at a History Group fringe meeting in Brighton in 1998,[2] after speaking, typically, to a largely empty Commons chamber, Grimond would leave in a lonely way with his head held slightly to one side. In the end, what changes did he really make?

Would this meeting, at Brighton in 2002, reinforce or undermine the potent Grimond mythology?

WRITING GRIMOND'S LIFE

The first speaker was Michael McManus, the author of the biography of Grimond, *Towards the Sound of Gunfire*. McManus is a Conservative, a former private secretary to Edward Heath, so his confession to being on the liberal wing of the Tory party was a clue to his interest in Grimond. At one point, McManus alluded to the empathy he had built up with his subject, finding himself quoting Grimond from Conservative political platforms and hearing the audiences approving his words. He began his talk by exploring how it was strange that Grimond was the only significant post-war political leader in Britain not to warrant a biography; this despite the very fullness of Grimond's life. But the question of sources soon raised itself as an explanation - no diary, no ordered catalogue of papers, his wife also dead and the greatest omission of them all, the absence of any ministerial papers. Nevertheless the opportunities to gather information did present themselves and McManus was soon running through the story of Grimond's life. He had a privileged childhood, born into a wealthy Dundee mercantile family, and went to Eton, where he played cricket rather well. He went to Oxford, read for the bar, had a reasonable war and then went into politics. He spent time working for the United Nations and the National Trust before winning Orkney & Shetland at the 1950 general election.

McManus found that most people's recollections of Grimond were of a charming and delightful man, with great manner and presence, a fine and witty raconteur. Reminiscences of a more negative kind, the sort of thing a biographer can seize on to bring out the multi-coloured patterns of a life, were often hard to come by. But there were some. Russell Johnston described Grimond as 'the dilettante revolutionary', and Tam Dalyell, whose family had trouble with the National Trust over their ancestral home, the Binns, had a very low opinion of Grimond. McManus recounted a story told to him by Alan Watson about Grimond's deafness and the way in which he would use this disability to protect himself against bores and the prolix by turning down his hearing aid at appropriate moments. He also discovered that Grimond conformed to the Scottish stereotype of being careful with money, having never found anyone who had been bought a drink by him.

POLITICAL IMPACT

Turning to the substance of Grimond's political achievements, McManus described how Grimond had taken over the leadership of a defunct political party, reminding the audience that at the general elections of 1951 and 1955 Grimond was the only Liberal MP of the six returned to be opposed by the Conservatives – in McManus' view as a result of personal arrangements between Grimond's mother-in-law Lady Violet Bonham Carter and her friend Winston Churchill. The Liberal Party was desperately close to annihilation at Parliamentary level when Grimond succeeded Clement Davies as leader in 1956. His first achievement, then, was to move away from the position of closeness to the Conservatives, turn his back on possible further deals on seats like those in Bolton and Huddersfield, start the party thinking about its true location on the political spectrum and head in the direction of realignment of the left.

Under Grimond the electoral revival took shape, not just the great Parliamentary by-election triumphs of Torrington and Orpington, but getting candidates in the field after the humiliations of previous general elections and seeing the election of a steady stream of local coun-

cillors after years of decline. Grimond did this by force of personality, taking advantage of the beginnings of the age of television, on which he came over well. He also used the opportunity presented by the Suez crisis to make a real impact on the political classes, including the defection to the Liberals of some more liberal-minded Tories. The process went wider than that, though; Grimond was positioning the Liberal Party, McManus argued, to take advantage of the postwar social de-alignment of the late 1950s and early 1960s.

In this analysis, McManus was clearly taking his partisan audience with him. But he now began to dissent from the Grimond mythology with the opinion that Grimond's ideas and intellectual originality had been overplayed as contributors to the Liberal revival. Grimond, McManus argued, did not really take his ideas and policy positions seriously and if there was merit in Grimond's ideas, though they were planted in the period of his leadership, they only really came to bloom at a later time and on other parties' political agendas – home rule for Scotland, the reduction in the role of the state and the deadening hand of bureaucracy, the case for cooperation with Europe, and the whole question of realignment. Despite McManus' emphasis on the failure of these ideas to resonate with what the wider electorate then felt was important, from our current Liberal Democrat perspectives it just seems as if Grimond was ahead of his time.

Grimond resigned the leadership of the Liberal Party after the 1964–66 Parliament. The 1964 general election had failed to capitalise on the promise of Orpington or bring the party genuine leverage as they just missed holding the balance of power. Harold Wilson held out the prospect of influence but at the 1966 general election, although the Liberals gained more seats their overall vote declined and Labour came back with a landslide majority. McManus felt Grimond had by then done as much with the leadership of the party as he could. He had become bored and slightly tired, perhaps even a bit humiliated by the way in which he thought Wilson had used the situation. He could see that the potential for realignment, with the Liberals still having only a handful of seats, was a long way off and he had had enough. Once he had stood down from the leadership however, backing Jeremy Thorpe to succeed him in 1967, he regretted it and took on a new role, becoming a complete nuisance to the new leader.

In general after retirement as leader, McManus thought, Grimond took the opportunity to question and dissent from party policy and thinking and relished the furores he caused. First he flirted with the Scottish Nationalists (which so annoyed Russell Johnston) and then he adopted an out–of–character Euro-scepticism which continued even through the 1975 referendum campaign, although both of these approaches could be tracked to movements of opinion in his Orkney & Shetland constituency. In rather capriciously enjoying this outspokenness and dissent, McManus argued, Grimond denied himself full association with the success of the ideas he had floated throughout his career in politics.

POLITICS THEN AND NOW

The next speaker was William Wallace, academic, Liberal Democrat working peer, and principal contributor to some of the party's election manifestoes. During the 1966 general election campaign he had managed Jo Grimond's press publicity. On the train to Brighton, Wallace had met the political correspondent Peter Riddell, who on finding out that Wallace was going to speak about Grimond admitted he had just read Michael McManus' book and whereas he had never previously appreciated why people were so impressed by Jo Grimond, he now began to understand.

Wallace began by comparing the political scene of the Grimond era with that of today. In those days, he argued, it was possible to be 'an enlightened amateur'. Politics then was far less intrusive and much more respectful. Television interviewers were deferential, happy to give their subjects a chance to answer at length, not prone to sharp exchanges like today. Whereas Grimond was very good with the sweep of political ideas, he may have found it hard to cope with the contemporary approach to interviewing. Wallace compared his own experiences in being a member of the Liberal Party Organisation in 1966 and his later involvement in the 1997 campaign. He was the one-man 'night team' in the party press office in 1966, whereas a large, professional party cadre ran the same shift thirty years later. Wallace recalled Grimond coming into party headquarters, then on Smith Square, the night after the election, being a bit disappointed by the small number of Liberal seats then declared and then shuffling out into the night on his own. No party leader today could act like that.

In seeking an explanation for Grimond's success, Wallace began by alluding to his physical presence. His tallness allowed him to survey the mere mortals below and he seemed to find it amusing that the people he was looking down at were taking him seriously. Wallace agreed with McManus that there was a whimsical side to Grimond and that he often refused to take himself entirely seriously. What he did greatly enjoy was to meet people who were interested in politics, perhaps a group of students, and chatting informally about the underlying ideas of politics. In this way he was able to attract and charm people to the Liberal cause and as a result made a huge difference to the future of the party. By force of personality, he was able to inspire new members, particularly young people, and was highly effective at getting them working for the party in elections and recruitment campaigns.

Behind Grimond's easygoing façade, however, Wallace identified a man who himself worked quite hard, because the party did not have the resources to employ a large staff. Mark Bonham Carter, Frank Byers and Arthur Holt were all stalwart supporters but there was not much party infrastructure behind them. Harry Cowie helped out immensely writing policy but Grimond wrote his own books and pamphlets, and his own speeches. The image of the professional gentleman and amateur politician that Grimond promoted did actually disguise great activity in making the party buzz with ideas. He pushed the party more towards an understanding of the relationship with Europe, and the key position of constitutional reform, but more importantly in Wallace's analysis, he took back the party from the economic liberals and the influence of people like Oliver Smedley and Arthur Seldon. He

backed party think-tanks like the Radical Reform Group and turned the Liberals once again into a social liberal party. The economic liberals transferred their allegiance to the Tories and eventually captured it under the influence of people like Sir Keith Joseph and Margaret Thatcher. Transforming the party as he did, and providing it with a set of new ideas for a modern era, was Grimond's abiding legacy.

Wallace identified the high point of Grimond's influence and leadership as 1959–62. The context was the failure of Labour to win the 1959 general election, its third defeat in a row; the publication of the influential paperback *Must Labour Lose?* and the creation of a situation in which Grimond could credibly argue for a realignment of the left, as Labour could not win alone.

This was the rationale Grimond provided to people who were attracted to the party – that the Liberals could be relevant again. Sadly, in 1963–64, Labour began to reassert itself. And, according to Wallace, Grimond trusted Harold Wilson more than he should have. Wilson had a working majority of three at the 1964 general election but quickly lost a by-election and was therefore down to a majority of only one. Grimond gave Liberal support to the government because he felt it right to do so but he thought he had an understanding with the Prime Minister which would help progressive government in Britain, and over the crucial first six months of 1965 helped the Labour government to survive.

As soon as the opinion poll ratings began to swing back in Labour's favour, Wilson, the consummate if unprincipled politician, made a speech to the Labour Party conference that ridiculed the Liberal Party and Jo Grimond. It was at that point that Grimond decided he had had enough – a decision confirmed by the result of the 1966 election.

Wallace concluded that what Grimond left behind was a very different party, and an entirely new generation of activists. He gave credibility to the idea that young people who were radical should join the Liberal Party rather than Labour, and in so doing he regenerated the party in a fundamental way.

THE PERSONAL TOUCH

Our next speaker was Tony Greaves, community politician, now a member of the House of Lords and in the Grimond era chair of the Union of Liberal Students. Greaves began his recollections by reminding the audience that Grimond was always known in the party as 'Jo'. This informality and familiarity typified Grimond's relationship with the Liberal Party but at the same time he was hero-worshipped in a way in which no subsequent leader has been, or has indeed deserved to be. Greaves referred to the fact that one of the speakers for the meeting had been delayed and turned up late, and another one had got the date wrong and did not turn up at all – saying, to affectionate laughter, that this was a great tribute to Jo.

If William Wallace, who was delayed, had been Jo Grimond, he would not have taken a taxi from the station but would still have been wandering through the streets of Brighton looking for the meeting venue. Grimond was famous for causing panic among hosts of meetings or rallies he was scheduled to attend, with perhaps hundreds of people waiting to hear him speak, by turning up late or being discovered having a cup of tea with the caretaker, having slipped in unobtrusively by the back door.

Greaves had a particular memory of Jo, passing him on the escalator at Euston Station, all alone without fuss or ceremony, heading for the night sleeper on his long journey back to his constituency. Greaves thought this typified Grimond's amateur approach to politics, which would be impossible for any modern party leader, who would be surrounded by an entourage of aides and press corps. This approach did not even survive the leadership of Jeremy Thorpe, who when he took over from Grimond instituted a rule that the leader had to be met by large cars – and it had to be a *large* car – which in Greaves' opinion, started the rot.

Surveying some of Grimond's successors as leader, Greaves thought Thorpe did not have Jo Grimond's charisma or his deep interest in ideas. He was a very good actor and political performer but had no strategy at all. David Steel certainly had a strategy but by the time of David Steel, leaders had become ordinary folk. They had reached the elevated position of leader but people could remember when they had been rank-and-file members. Jo was never an ordinary person. Paddy Ashdown again had a strategy for the party but one that caused internal disagreements and fierce battles, well documented in the Ashdown diaries.

Grimond's great policy was of course realignment of the left, although he never really defined it and deliberately kept the idea vague. When he did expound the approach he often found that people in the party disagreed with him because the implication was always that the Liberals would be forming some

kind of alliance or arrangement with a section of the Labour Party and they were not willing to compromise their Liberalism. But despite Grimond's vagueness about defining the outcome of realignment, he was clear about two things in particular.

First, that Liberals were on the left in politics. He established, at a time when the Liberal Party had been drifting in a backwater of old-fashioned free trade in the early 1950s, that it was a party of the left, opposed to the Conservatives and the forces of the right. In doing so, he was reclaiming the historic position of the party, which had of course been the progressive alternative to conservatism throughout the 19th century and up until the First World War.

The second point on which Grimond was clear was the distinction between the Liberal left and the socialist left, something that Greaves felt the contemporary Liberal Democrats ought to revisit. The message today from the party leadership, according to Greaves, is that the idea of the left-right political spectrum is something which has passed and is out of date and so the party's place on that spectrum should not be talked about – or, if it has not gone out of fashion, talking about it could lose the party votes.

Looking at some of the issues about which Grimond spoke and wrote more than forty years ago, they seemed to Greaves today to be very modern in terms of ideas. Greaves thought that Grimond would be at home in politics today with his ideas on the role of state, decentralisation, bureaucracy and his Liberal left interpretation of these themes. Grimond would not however be at home with the organisation and level of professionalism needed to run a modern political party. Grimond was lucky in that the small number of political organisers on whom he could call to help run the party between 1956 and 1967 were very able and were also highly talented thinkers. Grimond attracted these people to give of their talents for no real monetary reward, as the paid political jobs that exist today were not available then. Grimond drew in capable people from the universities to write a series of pamphlets and papers which created a corpus of Liberal policy which had not been seen for a long time and which defined the Liberal Party as a being on the centre-left of the British political spectrum. Looking at this work today, Greaves felt that a lot of it was really rather social democratic and perhaps in commissioning it, Grimond laid the foundations for the movements which later brought the merging of social democratic and liberal ideas and structures.

However, Greaves believed that the fact that there were disagreements in the party, or a lack of real understanding about the realignment of the left, did not really matter. There was a consensus in the party that the task was to increase the number of seats, to create a body of policy, to create a modern party under the direction of a leader who half the time gave superb inspiration and leadership and the other half of the time allowed his mind to wander across the range of political ideas and to promote his concept of realignment. This was how Grimond was and the party accepted it from him in a way that it was not prepared to do later under Steel or Ashdown when they were pushing their own realignment strategies.

THE ORATOR

Greaves then referred to Grimond's oratory and the way in which his leader's speeches became great events in the life of the party – all who heard them remembered them as inspirational. In Greaves' view no subsequent Liberal leader has been able to deliver speeches like Grimond. In fact he believed Grimond to have been the most charismatic performer and speaker in British politics since 1945, bearing comparison with the great orators of the 19th century, John Bright or Gladstone, who could speak for three hours and still keep people enthralled. This is now regarded as an obsolete skill, but Jo Grimond had that ability and it suited the politics of his time. It was one of the methods by which Grimond was able to hold the party in the palm of his hand, but he never used it to keep a grip on what the party did or to impose a view of what the party should think, because he genuinely believed in the diversity of ideas and the promotion of policy.

In finishing, Greaves referred to a party magazine called *Gunfire,* from 1967, which he used to edit. In this he wrote an editorial entitled 'The Grimond Generation'; it covered the great upsurge in Young Liberal membership and activity in the mid-late 1960s which in many ways was independent of the Liberal Party itself, a strange phenomenon in politics at the time. In that editorial, clearly written on behalf of the wider Young Liberal leadership, Greaves wrote:

> We are the Grimond generation. Whether we like it or not, most of us joined and became active in the Liberals and Young Liberals when Jo Grimond was not only the Liberal leader, to all intents and purposes he was the Liberal Party. With

> virtually no Parliamentary party, Liberal policy was whatever Jo said it was at the time. It must have been shockingly undemocratic but we were newcomers, we did not really notice. We joined because the Liberals (Jo Grimond) seemed to be bright and new and relevant and sensible. Things have changed a lot since then …[but] when we joined the Liberals it was still the party of compromise and consensus half-way between the others. The trouble was that much of what Jo Grimond said never tied up with this. Tories flopped into the party and flopped out again two or three years later. All that really interested them was electoral success. Large numbers of young people also joined the party but unlike our elders we usually listened to what Jo Grimond was saying. We were stupid enough to take him seriously. And as Bernard Greaves wrote in the previous magazine 'Everyone is shocked because we take some of the things Jo Grimond says to their logical development.' … Is it not logical to expect Jo Grimond's broadly based, left-wing party to have a vigorous and principled left wing able to express its radicalism in modern terms at the very least? Nowadays scarcely a month seems to pass without an article or speech from Jo Grimond denouncing the ethics of capitalism, the uselessness of Parliament, the breakdown of democracy, the heavy hand of bureaucracy. This analysis is incredible close to the Young Liberal analysis.

In concluding, therefore, Greaves felt that Grimond not only rescued the Liberal Party from the prospect of oblivion but also laid the foundations for a stream of radical thought within the party that survives very firmly in the Liberal Democrats today.

GRIMOND ON CAMPAIGN

The final speaker was Tom Dale, who had gamely agreed to stand in without warning at the very last moment, when one of the advertised speakers was unable to attend. Dale opened with the recollection of the first time Grimond had made any impact on his consciousness. This was in 1955, when Dale was an active member of the Young Liberals. At that time the Liberal Assembly was always held in the spring and that year, just as the conference was opening in Llandudno, the government called the general election. The then leader of the party, Clement Davies, had been ill and was recuperating on a boat in the Canary Islands. Grimond was obliged to step in and deliver the leader's speech on the first day of the Assembly, after which everyone departed for their constituencies to prepare for the election.

The first time Dale stood for Parliament was for the Harwich constituency at the general election of 1959. As leader Grimond travelled the country giving speeches at public meetings and doing radio and TV broadcasts. On one such trip Grimond had been speaking in Norwich and then had to return by train to London to get to a television studio. Grimond's train had to pass through Colchester, where it stopped for four minutes. Dale persuaded party HQ that if Grimond got off the train and said something to him and Peter Watts, the Liberal candidate for Colchester, it would be very good election publicity.

Intelligence duly arrived that Grimond would be in the second carriage, so the two candidates bought their platform tickets and went to meet the train with two local newspaper photographers. The train came in and Grimond opened the carriage door but was at first unwilling to get off the train in case it left without him. However he did get down and shook hands with both candidates for the benefit of the photographers and made two very short sentences of support. But that two or three minutes on a railway platform earned the two candidates front-page coverage in all the local newspapers. This particularly enraged the Tories who had been trying to get their leader to Colchester to boost their candidate, without success.

After that election, Dale then worked for the next five years or so for the party at the House of Commons and used to sit in on the weekly meeting of MPs under Grimond's chairmanship. While Grimond could be persuaded to support different party events, and turn up at by-elections to campaign, he was very reluctant to go to international Liberal meetings, as he never felt he properly connected. Dale was working with Liberal International and managed to get Grimond to take part briefly in meetings with leaders of overseas Liberal parties and then to go to South America on a tour. Colombia was a dangerous place then, as now, but Grimond insisted on walking around the town – much to the terror of his hosts – such was his naïveté.

In coming to the end of his talk, Dale referred to the previous speakers' recollections of Grimond as a prolific ideas man and writer of pamphlets and policy papers. He said he once asked Grimond's secretary, Catherine Fisher, how Grimond ever found the time to write all these pamphlets. She answered that they used to spend awful lot of hours travelling to and from Orkney & Shetland and London by train or air – in fact it was quicker to get to Norway from London than get to Shetland – and dictating papers was an efficient way of filling the time. It is interesting to speculate if Grimond would have left such a wonderful legacy of ideas and policy if he had been MP for a London constituency.

Graham Lippiatt is Secretary of the Liberal Democrat History Group.

1 'Leaders Good and Bad' (result of the Best and Worst Leaders poll), *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* 27: Summer 2000.
2 ' Obituaries and Great Men', *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* 21: Winter 1998–99.

Young Liberal history

Liberal Democrat Youth and Students (LDYS) are aiming to produce a book to celebrate A Century of Young Liberals / Ten Years of LDYS (working title!).

If anyone has any anecdotes, information and/or literature relating to the Young Liberals/LDYS or any of its predecessors, over the last 100 years (especially from the early part of the twentieth century), LDYS would like to hear from you.

They would also like to hear from anyone who would like to get involved with a working group which will be putting together the book and other events throughout 2003.

Please contact the LDYS Office: tel: 020 7227 1387 / 7227 1388; email: ldysadmin@libdems.org.uk.